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Matthew 15:21-28
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**171105 Peacemaking in an interfaith world:
Jesus and the Canaanite woman**

(image of Canaanite woman on screen)

Did Jesus really do that? Did Jesus really ignore a woman who came to him for help? Did he really call her and her people dogs? Did his disciples really egg him on in this? Is this story of the Canaanite woman, Jesus and the disciples really a good story to look at as we explore what it means to be Christian peacemakers in an interfaith world?

At first glance there seems to be a whole lot of Jewish male privilege going on here. Jesus doesn't come off so well in most of the story. The fact that he was fully human, a male Jew steeped in the privilege and exclusion that were part of his world, is obvious in this story. Can you imagine Jesus with prejudice? Because that seems to be where he starts in this story. Not where he ends, but where he starts. So why are we talking about this story when we want to learn about relating to our sisters and brothers of other faiths?

Let's look more closely. The story starts in a surprising place, with Jesus leaving Jewish territory and heading over to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This is Phoenicia, and in Mark's version of events Jesus meets a Syro-Phoenician woman there. Matthew intentionally uses an old word for the region. He calls her a Canaanite woman. Jesus has just been arguing with scribes and pharisees, but now he goes to Canaan.

There are all sorts of connotations and implications to using the word Canaanite. In the Old Testament, Canaanites were the people of the land that the people of Israel constantly fought against. They were the enemy. And they weren't just the political and ethnic enemy. They were the religious enemy. These were the people that worshipped Baal and that tempted the Hebrews into pagan worship. They were not to marry them. They were supposed to avoid them. They were to wipe them out. All so that they wouldn't fall into the worship of their gods and would remain true to the worship of Yahweh. So when Matthew tells us of Jesus meeting this Canaanite woman, all of this history is evoked. And very specifically, this **religious** history. This woman is of a different faith - of an **enemy** faith. In fact Tyre and Sidon are specifically condemned by many of the prophets, especially Ezekiel who spends four chapters declaring their evil and coming destruction.

Of course, there are a few alternate stories that play into this as well. Charleen mentioned a few of them last week. One such that stands out is the story of Elijah, who is sheltered by a woman from this same region. She is of Zarith, a town at that time belonging to Sidon. So the great prophet Elijah encounters a Canaanite woman, is sheltered by her, and she is given ongoing sustenance through a devastating drought. So this story also plays into the background to today's text.

Jesus intentionally goes to gentile territory. He intentionally goes to a place where he will encounter non-Jews. He intentionally goes to this area that is so condemned in the Old Testament. The intentionality of it makes it that much more surprising when he acts as he does.

Here is the story. Jesus goes to the region of Tyre and Sidon. There he is met by a Canaanite woman, a non-Jew, who approaches and addresses him. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." A number of surprises here. A woman, in a culture where women had no clout, no status, no voice, approaches a man and insists on being heard. A Canaanite woman, the kind of person the children of Israel were supposed to avoid on **religious** grounds. These things would have been shocking to the disciples and original audience of this story. Also surprising would have been the words with which she addresses him. This Canaanite, non-Jewish woman addresses him as Lord and Son of David - a title not even the disciples have as yet given him.

What surprises us but wouldn't have surprised them is Jesus' response. He doesn't respond to her cries and shouts at all. This would have been the expected thing for him to do. Ignore this rude woman who is breaking all the social mores. Kind of like we sometimes ignore the beggar asking us for money on the street. It is an uncomfortable situation that everyone would rather not be part of. So Jesus does the expected and ignores her. He is under no obligation to even acknowledge this foreign woman. And yet somehow we expect more from him. Does his culture, filled with racist, misogynistic and exclusionary overtones really influence him as it does so many people in our own world today?

The disciples clearly fit that mold. They ask Jesus to send her away as they have recently asked him to send away the 5000 who need to be fed and will soon ask him to send away the 4000 who need to be fed. He answers them and not her. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, at this point Jesus understands his mission in very limited ways. He believes his work is only among the Jews.

Look at the image on the screen. Let's look closer at the woman, Jesus and the disciples as they exclude her. Do you see the eyes turned away? Do you see Jesus turned away? Can you imagine this desperate woman, afraid for the life of her child, trying to break through that?

And yet she does. The woman persists. She comes and kneels before Jesus and movingly asks: "Lord, help me." Surely now Jesus is going to do what he always does and help the one who so clearly needs it. But Jesus surprises us again - and not in a good way. He finally responds to her but basically to insult her and call her and her people dogs. "It is not fair to take the children's food

and throw it to the dogs." Really Jesus? Do you really have all those attitudes and prejudices and sense of privilege towards those of other races and other religions? Again this wouldn't have surprised his disciples or first hearers of this story. But it sure surprises me. To this point Jesus isn't a very good example of how to be a peacemaker in an interfaith world. He has been raised to a certain kind of Jewish male privilege and he seems to be just as unaware of it as so many of us are in our own time and place. So far the interfaith hero of the story is clearly the

Canaanite woman who has shown surprising respect for this Jewish man, although in a fairly insistent kind of way.

She responds to Jesus with words that harken back to the feeding of the 5000 shortly before this story. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” In the feeding of the 5000 Jewish males, and women and children as well, there were 12 baskets full of leftover bread. Plenty to feed those beyond that crowd. Much more than the crumbs that this woman is asking for.

Now Jesus finally responds how we expect him to. “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

For the disciples and those who first heard this story, this would have been the moment of biggest surprise. Not that Jesus ignored her and finally insulted her. That would have been expected within their worldview. They would have expected insults and poor treatment of this woman of a different faith. Unfortunately this seems to be a growing expectation in our own world as well. But the disciples would have been shocked when Jesus speaks to her of her great faith and then heals her daughter. This is a Canaanite woman! Representative of idolatry and lewd worship practices! How can Jesus possibly talk about **her** great faith. In fact, this is the only time in the gospel of Matthew that **anyone** is lauded for their great faith. And it is this Canaanite woman.

Jesus seems to have learned something significant from his interactions with her. He seems to have recognized his own privilege, his own prejudices, his own racism. Unlike most of us, in that moment he is able to recognize where he has gone wrong, repent of it, and change. In interacting with a person who has challenged him, he comes to a whole new realization of God’s way. He doesn’t prevaricate or avoid the issues or make excuses. He changes, he heals the woman’s daughter, he treats her with respect.

Andrew Prior says it like this:

“The glory of the story lies in the fact that Jesus unconsciously, but completely, lived within a culture based around racial privilege. He could see privilege and exclusion expressed toward his people by the empire of Rome. He could see privilege and exclusion expressed within his cultural bounds, and had abandoned it as he saw that it was contrary to Kingdom. He did not yet see that the whole of his culture, like ours, was based on exclusion.

Despite this, Jesus the Human One, was human enough to have his Jewish male privilege with all its racism, pierced by plight of a poor and desperate woman who came from an enemy people. The glory is that Jesus, despite his privilege, was still able to be merciful; able to choose the way of God— and that he did. The glory is that when he understood what he had done, and how he had behaved, he changed instantly, and healed the daughter of the woman; he fed her, just as he had fed his Jewish sisters and brothers. And perhaps that’s the most confronting and scary thing of all about this story, for us. Because what it means is that we have to change if we are going to

worship Jesus with our hearts instead of only our lips, or we will be keeping our hearts far from him, and from his way.” (end of quote)¹

So Jesus manages to change in his interactions with the Canaanite woman. In fact he goes from here along the sea of Galilee interacting with crowds and healing many. There is some indication that these crowds were gentiles as well. And then Jesus feeds them, this time 4000 men with women and children in addition. In the first feeding 5000 men were fed and 12 distinctively Jewish baskets were left over. Numbers of Jewishness. In this second feeding 4000 are fed- perhaps indicative of the four corners of the earth - and the seven baskets are no longer distinctively Jewish but are common baskets used by everyone at the time. In the tradition both four and seven are gentile numbers. In his encounter with the woman near Tyre and Sidon, Jesus has learned something about his mission, about how to interact with difference, about how to encounter those different than himself. He has learned it **from** the gentile. **From** the person of a different faith. He has learned something significant about his own faith in his interfaith encounter.

So what do we learn about being peacemakers in an interfaith world from this story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman? I think there are a few things. First, location. Jesus went to Phoenicia. He went to a place where he could interact with people of a different faith. It is easy in our world to avoid the other. To live within our own circles and not interact with those who are different. Or at least to not always know the incredible, rich diversity around us. This is part of the point of peace camp. To bring Jews and Muslims and Christians together in a place where they can interact.

Secondly, Jesus learned from this woman of a different faith. He was changed by the encounter. In fact he learned more about **his own** religion by interacting with a woman from a different one. I remember an encounter I had with a friend of mine in Toronto. He said that his religion was anarchy, although he had a huge knowledge of many religions, including Christianity. He challenged my own understanding of Christianity, and I learned some things from this non-Christian that I hadn't from the many Christians I interacted with regularly. In our interfaith interactions we need to be honest and clear about our own faith. Good interaction with those of other faiths doesn't mean being lukewarm about our own faith. In that we can also be open to what we can learn from those who believe differently than we. Sometimes that can strengthen our own faith even as we understand the other better. I think this also happens in the London Interfaith Peace camp.

A corollary of this is that it's really about the people. Jesus wasn't interacting with a "religion." He wasn't comparing belief systems and systematic theology. He was interacting with a person, a real person. It's important to get to know people of other faiths. Sometimes real people help us get past our stereotypes. Friendship can lead to understanding.

¹ Andrew Prior, "Blind Privilege and the Kingdom of God," at <https://www.onemansweb.org/blind-privilege-and-the-kingdom-of-heaven-matthew-1510-28.html>

Finally and perhaps most importantly, there is no place in interfaith interactions for privilege, exclusion, and racism. This story questions our assumptions and our categorising and judging of people different than us. Jesus comes with unconscious assumptions, interacts with a gentile woman, realizes that he is wrong, and changes. He acknowledges his assumptions and learns how better to live into God's calling. So perhaps part of interfaith peacemaking is looking at our own privilege, our own assumptions, our own prejudices and learning to see past them.

Jesus, fully human that he was, learned and changed and more fully claimed a vision of God's intentions in the world. In the story of his interaction with the Canaanite woman he shows signs of unconscious Jewish male privilege and stereotyping. In his encounter with this woman he gains understanding and sees the error in his ways. He better understands his own purpose even as he gets to know her a little bit. Jesus gives up his privilege. He ceases to exclude. He follows the way of compassion and inclusion. He loves as God loves. In our own interfaith encounters may we do likewise. AMEN.